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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 001118

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TAGS: OVIP PREL PGOV ELAB KDEM PHUM HO US CI OAS
SUBJECT: SECRETARY SOLIS VISITS HONDURAS TO INAUGURATE
ACCORD VERIFICATION COMMISSION

Classified By: AMBASSADOR HUGO LLORENS FOR REASONS 1.4 B/D.

¶1. (C) Summary: The inauguration of the Verification Commission to monitor Honduras's political accord took place on November 3 during a two-day visit by its two international commissioners, Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis and former President of Chile Ricardo Lagos. The visit took place under the auspices of the Organization of American States (OAS). In an intensive series of meetings with President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, de facto leader Roberto Micheletti, senior members of Congress, electoral tribunal members, presidential candidates, and others, Secretary Solis, President Lagos, OAS facilitators, and the Ambassador made progress toward the next step in the accords, implementation of a government of national unity. The issue of the restoration of President Zelaya, which Congress is to decide on under the accord, remained a significant stumbling block. President Zelaya and his representative on the commission insisted that the accords require his return to power. However, installation of a government of national unity would create significant momentum toward resolution of this issue. The Verification Commission did a tremendous job under difficult circumstances and under pressure to produce forward momentum on very short notice. End summary.

¶2. (U) Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis and former President of Chile Ricardo Lagos, the two international members of the Verification Commission of the Tegucigalpa-San Jose Agreement, visited Tegucigalpa November 3-4 to attend the inauguration of the commission and to create momentum for implementation of the next step, creation of a government of national unity. The two Honduran commission members are Arturo Corrales, representing the de facto government, and Honduran Ambassador to the United Nations Jorge Arturo Reina, representing President Zelaya. On the U.S. side, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Craig Kelly, the Ambassador, and Deputy Undersecretary of Labor Sandra Polaski also participated in the discussions. Representing the OAS were Political Affairs Director Victor Rico; Jose Octavio Borbon, Argentina's former Ambassador to the United States; and former Chilean government minister Enrique Correa. Following the departure of Secretary Solis and President Lagos, Borbon and Correa stayed in Tegucigalpa to continue the commission's efforts to ensure implementation of the accord.

¶3. (SBU) Ambassador Solis and President Lagos began their

mission on November 3 with a briefing by OAS representatives and Ambassador Llorens. The first working meeting of the commission as a whole followed. The official inauguration of the commission took place that afternoon, followed by a meeting with President Zelaya at the Brazilian Embassy and a dinner for presidential candidates at the Ambassador's residence, which former President Carlos Flores also attended. On November 4, the commission members met with representatives of the Supreme Electoral Commission, senior members of Congress, and de facto President Micheletti. After another internal meeting, the commission held a pre-departure press conference.

Initial Briefing

¶4. (C) The Ambassador and OAS representatives briefed Secretary Solis and President Lagos on the situation, including the decision by the leadership of Congress to remit the Tegucigalpa-San Jose Accords to other institutions to seek further guidance. They discussed a letter sent by regime Minister to the Presidency Pineda Ponce to President Zelaya asking for names for the creation of a Government of National Unity. President Lagos and several of the OAS staff members (including Ambassador Borbon and Victor Rico) expressed the view that this letter represented an attempt by Micheletti to control the process. Honduran representatives Arturo Corrales and Ambassador Jorge Arturo Reina joined the meeting later to review the situation and discuss objectives.

Inaugural Ceremony

¶5. (C) The inaugural ceremony took place on November 3 at the Marriott Hotel, the site of the commission's discussions, with a large press contingent and several hundred supporters of President Zelaya and Micheletti. President Lagos and Secretary Solis conveyed a very positive message of hope and reconciliation and expectation that the Accord be rigorously implemented and that the calendar of implementation be strictly adhered to. For the Micheletti side, Arturo Corrales was measured and prudent. Unfortunately, Zelaya representative Ambassador Jorge Arturo Reina gave a tough, divisive speech criticizing the coup and coup supporters, earning wild applause from the Zelaya side and stony silence from the Micheletti contingent. The Ambassador later told Ambassador Reina that his statement had not been constructive and created a divisive tone at a crucial moment.

Meeting with President Zelaya

¶6. (C) Secretary Solis and President Lagos's November 3 meeting with President Zelaya took place at the heavily guarded Brazilian Embassy, where President Zelaya took refuge upon his September 21 return to Honduras. P/DAS Kelly, Deputy Undersecretary Polaski, the Ambassador, and OAS Representative Victor Rico also attended. In addition to Ambassador Reina, President Zelaya was accompanied by advisors including Rasel Tome, Juan Carlos Reina (Arturo Reina's son), and Father Andres Tamayo. President Zelaya took a hard-line and backward-looking position, arguing that the agreement required his restitution and that if Congress denied his legitimate right to the Presidency then he and many Hondurans and international community members would not recognize the elections. He said that he had been flexible in negotiating the accords, making significant concessions, including an agreement not to press for a fourth ballot box and to accept a government of national reconciliation. He urged the commission to press for implementation of the provision on restitution in the accord (article 5), which he asserted was closely linked to the article on a government of national reconciliation (article 1). Only the legitimate President could run the government of national unity, he said.

¶7. (C) President Zelaya asserted that, if he were not restored, some political parties and many individual

Hondurans would reject the elections and 50 of the 300 Liberal Party mayoral candidates would withdraw. He added that the resistance (i.e. the pro-restoration movement, which has held daily demonstrations and promoted an electoral boycott) has become a powerful force in Honduran society. He defended his human rights records, saying that, unlike the de facto regime, he had not shut down media outlets. He asserted that, under the de facto regime, 3,000 people have been detained (most for less than 24 hours), people have been beaten, and the military has used excessive force.

¶8. (C) President Lagos urged President Zelaya to look forward, particularly toward the creation of a government of national unity. He said he believed that, once this government was created, Micheletti would resign and the Minister of Governance, as the senior minister, would play an important transitional role until the Congress decided on restitution. He added that President Zelaya's ability to leave the Brazilian Embassy was an important issue to address. Secretary Solis said the commission would focus on keeping both sides working hard to take concrete steps to implement the accord. She said that she understood that this was a difficult process and told Zelaya that the fact that the President had sent her here represented their commitment to resolve the crisis.

Dinner with Presidential Candidates

¶9. (C) The Ambassador hosted a dinner for the four Verification Commission members with five of the six presidential candidates (all except Carlos H. Reyes), along with former president Carlos Flores and OAS representative Victor Rico. Statements by the five reflected how the

candidates have evolved to become a group that, despite their political differences, was in strong support of the accord. Cesar Ham, of the leftist Democratic Unification Party, spoke of how the accord gave the country an opportunity to restore democracy, while Bernard Martinez, of the right-leaning Innovation and Unity Party (PINU), spoke of the need for Honduras to move forward. The two main candidates, Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo of the National Party and Elvin Santos of the Liberal Party, pledged their strong support for the accord's implementation. Flores wrapped up the dinner, talking about how Zelaya's antics had pushed the Honduran political system to the breaking point. Referring to the June 28 coup, Flores said that, while he had rejected it and was the &wrong prescription to the malady,⁸ it was a reality and Honduran politicians had to work together to restore constitutional order. Secretary Solis and President Lagos thanked the candidates for their efforts and urged them to continue to press forward, reminding them that they represented the political future of the country.

Meeting with Supreme Electoral Tribunal

¶10. (C) On November 4, the commission met with the three-member Supreme Electoral Tribunal: David Matamorros, Enrique Ortez Sequeira, and Saul Escobar. The three officials provided the Commissioners with an in-depth look at preparations for the November 29 general elections. The Hondurans made a credible presentation of their considerable effort to organize the process in an efficient and transparent manner. They discussed a number of innovative monitoring procedures that are being implemented, many launched by international donors including USAID. The magistrates expressed the hope that the international official community would send observers to support their process. They also expect to have a large number of domestic observers. Secretary Solis and President Lagos noted that the elections were a key element to the solution to the crisis. They briefed the Hondurans on the Verification Commission's efforts to implement the accords and stressed that the extent of progress on implementation would have a significant impact on the level of international support for the elections.

Meeting with National Congress Leaders

¶11. (C) The Commissioners met with representatives of the Congressional leadership, led by Congress vice president Ramon Velasquez. Velasquez told the Commissioners that Congress had requested opinions on the possible restoration of President Zelaya from the Public Ministry (roughly equivalent to a ministry of justice), National Ombudsman, and Supreme Court. He said that his understanding of the legal process for transfer of power would be for Micheletti to swear in the government of national unity and resign, followed by a vote by Congress on the restitution issue.

¶12. (C) The representative of the PINU party asserted to the Commissioners that there is no possibility of President Zelaya being restored before the elections. After the elections, he said, the President-elect will be a major political force, especially if he wins with a large majority.

In addition, people will be less afraid of President Zelaya after the election. The President-elect will be in a position to ask for restitution, perhaps for as brief a period as a few weeks. Minority Leader Satisfecho "Fito" Irias of the National Party said that Congress supports the agreement and will immediately come into session to consider the restitution issue once Congress receives the opinions. Asked whether it is important for Congress to vote on restitution before the November 29 elections, President Lagos replied, "Absolutely." It is in Honduras's best interest, he continued, to have a unity government in place prior to the elections. Secretary Solis stressed the importance of the responsibility Congress has been given, noting that, as a former member of Congress herself, she understands the complexity of the legislative process. She said that the United States is not telling Congress how to decide, but

Congress must deliberate in a serious manner. President Lagos pressed for adherence to the November 5 deadline for appointment of a government of national unity.

Meeting with Micheletti

¶13. (C) At their meeting with de facto leader Micheletti, which P/DAS Kelly, Undersecretary Polaski, the Ambassador, and OAS representatives also attended, Secretary Solis and President Lagos said that they wanted to help with the process of installing a government of national unity.

Micheletti responded that he fully supported the negotiation and implementation of the accord in a manner consistent with Honduran law. He reiterated several times his offer to resign if that would be helpful to resolve the crisis, but said that President Zelaya would also have to resign. A prominent Honduran would then assume the presidency. President Lagos told Micheletti that the creation of the national unity government would mean that Micheletti's mission was done and that he would be required to resign.

¶14. (C) Micheletti said that he had reached out to President Zelaya and other political leaders in suggesting names for the government of national unity. He indicated that he would like two of his cabinet ministers to stay: Minister of Security Jorge Alberto Rodas Gamero, who had been Zelaya's minister of security, and Minister of Defense Adolfo Leonil Sevilla, the former deputy minister who served very briefly as minister under Zelaya after the resignation of the previous minister over issues related to the fourth ballot box. Micheletti disputed the assertion made by President Zelaya and his allies that the creation of a government of national unity would require Zelaya's restoration as president. Noting that she was in Honduras at the request of President Obama and Secretary Clinton, Secretary Solis said that she looked forward to monitoring the implementation of the accord.

¶15. (C) De facto Foreign Minister Carlos Lopez Contreras told the commission members that sanctions against Honduras

have hurt not only Honduras itself but the rest of Central America. The closing of the border hurt trade flows and the situation as a whole has damaged business confidence. Investment is down not only in Honduras but in the rest of the region. Lopez Contreras noted that the European Union had suspended its trade negotiations with Central America because of the situation in Honduras.

Press Conference

¶16. (U) At a press conference immediately prior to their departure, Secretary Solis and President Lagos both emphasized the importance of maintaining forward momentum on the implementation of the Accords and stressed that Micheletti's resignation would have to be part of the installation of a government of national unity.

Comment

¶17. (C) The Verification Commission did a tremendous job under difficult circumstances and under intense time pressure. The most significant achievement was the inauguration of the commission in accordance with the timetable set out in the accord. The commissioners were able to meet with all the relevant players, including Micheletti, who initially seemed reluctant to meet. In their two public events, Secretary Solis and President Lagos were able to convey a message of U.S., international, and inter-American commitment to help in resolving the crisis and convey hope that the accord represented an agreed and peaceful way forward. Following the departure of the international commissioners, Ambassador Borbon and Correa continue to work under OAS auspices to press for the installation of a government of national unity on behalf of the commission. The Ambassador and Embassy staff remained engaged with the commission's efforts throughout the day on November 5,

keeping the parties talking and continuing to press for the prompt installation of a government of national unity. While significant challenges remain, the inauguration of the commission was an important and promising step forward. End comment.

¶18. (U) Secretary Solis was not able to clear on this cable before her departure.

LLORENS